DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 542 CS 216 998

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TITLE The Treasures of Plato's "Phaedrus": A Creative Interpretation for Teaching and Learning in Modern Day.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; *Persuasive Discourse; *Philosophy; *Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Comprehension
IDENTIFIERS *Phaedrus; *Plato of Athens; Symbolic Analysis; Textual Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon Plato's "Phaedrus" from a background in education and experience teaching written business communications. The interpretation and development presented are guided by the Platonic method of collection and division, which is introduced in "Phaedrus." The paper begins with an evaluative overview, followed by an interpretation of Plato's collective orientation to the work. Major parts of the dialogue, such as Lysias' and Socrates' speeches and immortal forms represented, are then analyzed, followed by a synthetic reflection that provides a brief review of the organic whole, and a concise critique of the quality and helpfulness of R. Hackforth's commentary. The closing summary suggests that: (1) "Phaedrus" challenges the reader's intellect and supplies deeper perception with each reading; (2) it contains a related set of themes and subthemes which all serve to improve the soul and intellect; and (3) the degree of focused mental activities engaged by the reader is at least a partial indicator of the value "Phaedrus" will impart. (EF)

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The Treasures Of Plato's Phaedrus:

A Creative Interpretation for Teaching

And Learning In Modern Day

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The estimated date of Plato's composition of Phaedrus is 370 B.C., yet its teachings are timeless. The following interpretation of Phaedrus is based on a translation by R. Hackforth, M.A., which was published by the Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1951. The 172-page book is longer than most translations of Phaedrus due to Hackforth's relatively extensive introductory and commentary inclusions.

I reflect upon Phaedrus from the vantage point of a background in education and experience as a teacher of written business communications.

Organization

My interpretation and development are guided by the Platonic method of collection and division, which is introduced in Phaedrus. I begin with an overview, followed by an interpretation of Plato's collective orientation to the work. Major parts of the dialogue (division) are then analyzed, followed by a synthetic reflection that provides a brief review of the organic whole. A concise critique of the quality and helpfulness of Hackforth's commentary follows, and a summary statement concludes the interpretation.

Evaluative Overview

Plato's Phaedrus is a rich, comprehensive, and complex literary work. The richness of Phaedrus is evidenced by its multiple applications, for it illustrates effective teaching skills, incorporates sound learning principles, explicates methods for a life of Good, and has implications for responsible citizenship as well as personal and intellectual development. The comprehensiveness of Phaedrus is apparent in the breadth and depth of its multiple themes. Phaedrus has a motif-type hierarchy of themes. The broadest theme is one of ascertaining immortal truths and understanding. Narrow themes or theme

sets are concrete and specific as they specify the technicalities of structuring an effective discourse through the technique of collection and division. The complexity of Phaedrus is demonstrated by its multiple, interwoven system of themes, as well as by its various and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Phaedrus is one of Plato's more mature works. Consequently, it gathers within one piece of literature a wide range of Plato's well-developed philosophy of humankind and sensuality; immortal ideal forms including soul, love, and the Good; and the development of truth and knowledge through dialectic techniques.

Unity

It is important to note that throughout the composition Plato unified his philosophy and teaching with practical applications. Examples of practical application include the structure of Phaedrus, its methods of content presentation and development, Socrates' relationship with his student, the use of illustration and analogy, the engagement of dialectic technique, and the choice of subject matter.

Reader Comprehension

Overall, Phaedrus is an excellent example of the practical and intellectual aspects of Plato's philosophy. The organization and teachings of the composition, however, are not easily understood without considerable hindsight, or reflection. Phaedrus is a work that demands the reader's concentration and reflective thought. More than one reading may be needed to appreciate the richness, comprehensiveness, and complexity of Phaedrus. For example, the introduction describes the main characters' departure from the city and entrance into the natural beauties of the countryside. The reader may perceive this description literally as a simple beginning. Reflecting upon the whole of the work, however, the reader is likely to recognize the appropriateness of the figurative

interpretation. Figuratively, the descriptive opening is an epitome that states the immortal heights, beauty of forms, and far-reaching truths that Socrates and his student Phaedrus reveal.

Dialogue Setting and Circumstance

The composition opens with a figurative representation of the organic (collective) whole. Phaedrus is primarily a dialogue between philosopher/teacher Socrates and an impressionable young student Phaedrus. Young Phaedrus has just been inspired by Lysias' speech about passion between men. When Phaedrus meets Socrates, they agree to depart from the city and walk into the beautiful countryside where they may begin their discussion of Lysias' speech. They walk along the Ilisus River and find a delightful resting place among tall, wide-spreading trees with high branches. Flowers are fragrant and in full bloom; the air is fresh.

Figuratively speaking, leaving the city with its narrow streets and routine activities illustrates how Socrates and Phaedrus will move beyond the materialist boundaries of narrow sensuality and carnal desire. They journey to the heights of true beauty where long-term, far-reaching truths and knowledge are attained and where the thirst for the Good can be quenched. The river Ilissus will refresh and nourish the organic whole of the tree that has high, far-reaching branches. Likewise, the river of immortal Good will refresh the whole spirit and quench the thirst for knowledge and truth. Arriving at a delightful resting place may symbolize an intellectual resting place in philosophy and truth. The tall, wide-spreading trees and high branches represent the heights and breadth of immortal ideal forms and their beauties, which are available through the hard intellectual work and life of a philosopher. The blooms and fragrances are interpretable as rewards of the Good life. Freshness of the air is the freshness and purity of Socrates' ideals.

The figurative introduction also illustrates an important principle that Plato taught: A speaker must know and understand the nature of the phenomena as a whole. Additionally, the speaker must understand soul in general and, in particular, the soul to whom he/she speaks. Then the speaker must know how to select from among the various types of discourse the most fitting for the particular south. Socrates knew the topics well—methods for the pursuit of truth, the forms of love and Good, and the concept of soul. He knew soul in general and Phaedrus' soul in particular. With this knowledge, he appealed and spoke to Phaedrus' particular type of soul and intellect by use of a most effective type of discourse—dialectic.

Instructional Purpose and Method

Socrates' purpose as a teacher was to train and shape the intellect and soul of his student toward the achievement of the Good. The method for training and shaping was dialectic, which served to unveil immortal truths already possessed by Phaedrus' soul but not yet fully conscious and reflected upon by his intellect. Through dialectic technique, Phaedrus achieved an understanding of immortal forms.

Dialectics is analogous to a chisel that may be used to chip away non-truths and opinions in order to reveal beautiful and permanently valuable gems of truth. Reasoning and reflective thought are essential parts of dialectic, and it is through these processes that truths are revealed. Socrates, in his dialectic style, contrasts unreflective desire and immediate pleasure with the reflective advantages of mind. Consequently, mind serves as the primary driving force for intellectual achievement.

Three Pillars

Three speeches serve as the three pillars upon which the teachings of Plato in this composition are set; and they are illustrative of degrees of rhetoric quality.

Lysias' Speech

Lysias' speech represented rhetoric as practiced in Plato's day by most sophists. According to Platonic Socrates, sophistic rhetoric was an exercise in persuasive power that could make the worst appear to be the better if that served the purpose of the rhetorician. Lysias' purpose, for example, was the immediate sensual pleasure of love for himself, but at the expense of the listener/participant. Socrates also stated that the sophists prepared speeches haphazardly and strung arguments together without consideration of overall development and unity. Lysias' speech, as an example, was narrow, repetitive, and poorly organized.

First Speech by Socrates

Socrates was persuaded by Phaedrus to present a competing and follow-up speech to Lysias' speech on sensual love. Socrates' speech was superior to Lysias' speech insofar as it had better technical form, better style, and illustrated the important principle of pleasing the audience. However, the speech lacked regard for virtue, ideal truths, and the ultimate Good. Furthermore, the content was inconsistent with the speaker's level of knowledge and unresponsive to the listener's intellectual and spiritual needs.

Second Speech by Socrates

Socrates' second speech was true to his personal philosophy and teaching. It illustrated the style and technique necessary for a true art of rhetoric, as Plato defined it. Furthermore, the speech was a proper example of the philosopher's quality work. Not only was the speech of good form and style, it moved the student forward to higher intellectual understanding and truths.

Socrates "true" speech was in sharp contrast to the shallowness, superficiality, and arrangement of the other two speeches of the composition. Socrates' method of

comparing and contrasting the three speeches served as an effective teaching strategy, for it illustrated and made clear Socrates' instruction to Phaedrus regarding speech quality and its effect on the audience.

Immortal Forms: Love and Soul

The two main themes of the composition are love and soul.

Love

In the beginning of the composition, Socrates seemed sensually attracted to the young Phaedrus; but he does not yield. He instead pursues a higher order passion and teaches Phaedrus the collective and divisive forms of eternal love in the process.

Socrates' philosophical views and knowledge obligated him to pursue intellectual passions. Socrates, in fact, stated and demonstrated that he did not appreciate the narrow, sensual content or rhetorical quality of Lysias' speech. Socrates claimed that the topic was shameful and consequently covered his head when Phaedrus finally convinced him to deliver a better speech over the same topic. After the competitive speech on sensual love, Socrates prepared to depart and return to the city. He was turned back, however, by a "divine sign" which instructed him to purify himself from the blasphemous speech he just delivered. Socrates then delivers a second speech which is consistent with the truth and higher intellectual understanding that he possessed.

Through his speeches and dialectic, Platonic Socrates defined love by using his collection and division principle. He spoke of love in general as a passion, or madness, and then he divided love into its various forms. First, one learned to love one other person, then a few other persons. Progressively, the concept of love matures to the love of humanity, then to an immortal, eternal perception of the love form to which all other

types of love belong. Plato illustrated the effects of love forms by comparing and contrasting the three speeches, or pillars, essential to his instructional strategy.

Soul

Understanding soul was essential for the complete understanding of the organic whole of the ideal love form. Through concrete descriptions within a myth, Socrates effectively helped his student Phaedrus to visualize and comprehend soul. Phaedrus, then, came to a fuller understanding of both soul and love, as well as the relationship between them.

The Myth. Two steeds and a charioteer figuratively represent soul. The white steed represents intellect, reason, and knowledge. The black steed represents lust, wantonness, ugliness, and carnal desires. The while and black steed are continually in conflict, and the task of the charioteer is difficult and troublesome, for the charioteer must control this unruly team. Within this myth, the desirability of self-discipline is evident; for Socrates emphasized the challenge of the charioteer's work in controlling the black steed of lust and carnal desires.

The concept of soul included a sub concept, spirituality. Plato's concept of spirituality, in fact, was probably instrumental for the later development of Christianity. Socrates' myth describes our earthly embodiment as a soul with a body shell (Plato uses the analogy of an oyster in a shell); and the soul passes periodically to different embodiments. Nine different levels of human existence are possible, and the level one becomes is dependent upon the Goodness achieved in previous life. Reincarnation occurs every 1,000 years, alternating between rebirth as a human and as a beast. Punishment and rewards are received between embodiments; and new wings develop each 10,000 years, except for the philosophers, who are superior beings and receive new

wings every 3,000 years. A search for truth through processes of reasoning and feeding the soul intellectual pasturage will encourage plumage (feathers/wings) to grow and assist the soul to become fully winged and to achieve a higher human life level.

Following the instruction of soul, Socrates delivered his discourse on the ideal love. Phaedrus' grasp of the soul concept allowed him to understand that higher levels of love expressions contribute toward the betterment of one's soul and toward the attainment of Good. High order love, then, is an important food for the soul; and a soul properly nourished and cultivated can lead to reincarnation to the highest human life—that of a philosopher.

Technicalities

The final part of the composition moves from abstract concepts to the coverage of techniques necessary for constructing an effective discourse. In accordance with Plato's teaching, the speaker must first have knowledge and truth of the subject, and only then may use rhetoric to influence the minds of those who do not possess such knowledge and truth. Practical techniques suggested by Plato include: 1) knowing how things resemble and differ from one another; 2) making use of concrete words rather than abstract words, which can be misleading; 3) knowing which words the audience is bound to agree on and by which words they will fluctuate; 4) defining the phenomena; 5) dividing the subject to its appropriate limits; 6) having a concern for the nature of the soul in general and for a soul in particular; and 7) fitting the type of speech and speech arrangement to the particular soul.

Plato explained that any discourse should be constructed as if it were a living (organic) creature where each part connects and contributes to all other parts and relates to the whole. Especially important is the fact that effective use of speech technicalities and an orientation toward holistic construction require logical thinking.

In addition to technicalities and a holistic orientation, Plato included his principle of collection and division, which is similar to outlining. Collection identifies a broad form or class of things. Division shows a number of categories of this class where there may be further subcategories until all division is exhausted as appropriate for the particular discourse occasion.

Synthetic Overview

Many additional pages could be written about Phaedrus and its teachings, relevance, intellectuality, and qualities. Because of the limitations of space, though, a synthetic overview may suffice.

Concepts

The Phaedrus' overall instructional dimensions concern a triangle of three broad concepts: body, intellect, and soul and the links between them. The environment in which the triangle functions includes the ideal forms of love and Good, such as is known by a Platonic philosopher. Toward the attainment of the ideals of love and Good, the master's tool is applied—the dialectic technique. By use of dialectic, which its accompanying requirements for moral, intellectual, and knowledge aptitudes, the Platonic Socrates redefines rhetoric as a high-order art and a means of disseminating knowledge and truth. Plato insisted that the true rhetorician not only know and understand the phenomena but that the truth also be spoken.

Reader Benefit

The grand, overall benefit of Phaedrus is in summoning the reader to the activity of reflective thought. The composition probes one's reflective thought about the depths of conscious behavior and relationships. It encourages reflective evaluation of one's overall life as well as long-term consequences of specific acts. It puts the conscious life-world out

front where it may be examined, critiqued, and compared to an ideal and potential worth. The reader is gently and persistently beckoned to consider whether there is relevance in Phaedrus' teaching for contemporary life, whether today's ideas evolved from the Greek era or were reinvented later, and whether humanity has really advanced in all the centuries since the Greek enlightenment.

Teaching

The most relevant application of Plato's Phaedrus is for effective teaching. For example, the relationship between Socrates and student Phaedrus was conducive to effective learning outcomes. Socrates helped Phaedrus develop his ideas, reflect upon them, and discover truths. Socrates did not **tell** his student; instead, he guided him through a discovery process that emphasized reasoning. Plato believed that true wisdom and understanding come only by long study and reflection, aided by a teacher who is himself still learning and who acts as a guide rather than an authoritative figure. As a teacher, Socrates gently and respectfully shaped the mind of his student to the higher order and toward achievement of the Good. Socrates believed in the basic goodness of humans, and his pedagogical skill (primarily the dialectic process) illustrated that belief. Plato's choice of topic, love, was especially effective. He certainly must have known that the topic would arouse the boy's physical and mental energies, thus setting the stage for focused attention and maximum student participation in the instructional process.

Critique of Hackforth's Commentary

Hackforth's most useful section of commentary is his introduction. However, to benefit fully from his introductory comments, one must be familiar with most other works by Plato. The introduction is a compare-contrast discussion of Phaedrus and other works by Plato.

Hackforth's commentary throughout the balance of Phaedrus was only marginally useful, and its usefulness declined in the final sections of the book. For example, Hackforth used both English and Greek words in his sentences, yet he provided no translation for the Greek. The proportion of Greek words increased in the later part of the book. Consequently, an ability to read Greek is a prerequisite to making sense of Hackforth's commentary contribution. Perhaps Hackforth was writing only for other Greek scholars. For the non-Greek reader, however, his commentary becomes frustrating.

A second criticism of Hackforth concerns his perception of Plato's purpose. Hackforth asserts that the primary purpose of Phaedrus is centered on teaching Plato's style of rhetoric through the method of dialectic. Contrary to Hackforth's perception, the primary purpose of Phaedrus may be stated as dialectic technique leading to ideal forms of truth and knowledge, and ultimately the Good. Dialectic serves as a tool for the work of the artist/rhetorician. The artwork/learning outcome, which is ideal forms of truth and knowledge, seems to be the greater value of this composition. The technique or skill leading to truth and knowledge (dialectic) is indispensable.

Summary Statement

Phaedrus is a timeless treasury of great work. Its gems are truths and knowledge of immortal forms. Its focus is on the Good. Phaedrus challenges the intellect of the reader and supplies deeper perception with each reading. It contains a related set of themes and sub themes which all serve to improve the soul and intellect and lead to the Good.

Phaedrus is not a composition for the shallow minded, nor is it a "light" reader. The degree of focused mental activities engaged by the reader is at least a partial indicator of the value Phaedrus will impart.

Reference

Plato's Phaedrus (1951). (M. A. Hackforth, Trans.). New York: Liberal Arts Press.

(Original work written by Plato about 370 B.C.).